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Six Questions and 58 Answers about Using Cooperative Learning

Group activities are becoming more and more popular in the teaching of second/foreign languages and other subjects in Thailand and around the world. Since about 1970, a great deal of work has gone into research and methodology in order to develop ways that teachers can help their students learn more effectively and happily in groups. Many people working in this area use the term "Cooperative Learning", (also known as "Collaborative Learning") to describe these ways of enhancing group learning.

Since the late 1980s, ES/FL teachers interested in Cooperative Learning have come together to share ideas at the annual convention of the International TESOL organization. The 1996 convention was no exception. The four of us hosted a Breakfast Seminar at which fifty other teachers joined us to begin our day with good food and good discussion about important questions in using Cooperative Learning (CL) with our students.

Below is a list of the questions we discussed and the responses we received. After the convention, we showed our list to others and added their responses. These included a group of English teachers from Thailand attending a course at RELC in Singapore, sponsored by Srinakarinwirot University. We included everyone's responses, even when one response seemed to contradict a previous one. Each teacher must make their own decision based on their own particular teaching situation and their own beliefs about education. No doubt, you, our talented readers, will have some ideas we have not thought of. Please be so kind to write as to us and share them, so that we can share them with others. Thank you.

QUESTION A: HOW SHOULD WE RESPOND WHEN STUDENTS USE THEIR NATIVE LANGUAGE (L1) WHILE IN COOPERATIVE LEARNING (CL) GROUPS?

1. Some use of the L1 may be beneficial for a number of reasons. For example, some words are very difficult to explain or guess from context, and if the group has a time limit, it may be faster to use an L1 translation. Remember, we're helping students add a new language, not subtract their L1.
2. Rather than punishing L1 use, we can praise L2 use?
3. We should consider whether there is sufficient language support, e.g., demonstrations of appropriate language, so that students have the resources to do the task in the L2.
4. A long-term view is needed because students need a while to get comfortable and confident with the L2 and with working in groups.
5. One member of each group can be the Language Monitor whose role is to encourage appropriate L2 use.
6. CL activities, such as Think-Pair-Share (Kagan, 1994), provide students with time to plan before they need to speak. In Think-Pair-Share, each student first thinks alone about the teacher's question or task. Next, they discuss with one other student. Finally, they share their pair's answer or product with the rest of the class.
7. CL writing activities, such as Roundtable (Kagan), help those students who feel more comfortable writing in the L2 because there is less time pressure and no worries about pronunciation. In Roundtable, each student writes their ideas on a piece of paper and passes that paper to the next student. There can be one piece of paper per group or one per group member.

8. Some students use L1 because they feel they have to be 100% accurate in terms of form. We can explain that there is a time for accuracy and a time to focus on fluency and meaning. CL activities usually focus more on the latter.
9. Kagan's (1994) stoplight cards can be adapted so that each group using the L2 gets to display the L2 card, while groups where the L1 is used do not display their card.
10. We can discuss the issue with students and encourage them to reach a class consensus on using the L1 in their groups.
11. One small corner of the classroom can be designated as the place where students can go temporarily to speak the L1.
12. Teacher can give each group L1 tickets for the day, semester, or whatever, and students decide together if they need to use the L1. They turn in a ticket when the L1 is used. Groups discuss how many tickets they use and why. Optionally, recognition can be given to groups who use fewer tickets.
13. If teacher is not a native speaker, s/he can be a model of appropriate English use.
14. Use a variety of Talking Chips in which two chips are spent every time the L1 is used but only one chip for L2 use.
15. Each group has an English captain.
16. Low pressure environment in which risk taking is encouraged and it is okay to make mistakes.

QUESTION B: SHOULD WE EXPLAIN THE RATIONALE FOR CL AND THE PROCEDURE FOR CL TECHNIQUES TO THE CLASS IN ADVANCE?

1. CL can be threatening for students accustomed to the traditional classroom. Some explanation and discussion of the benefits of CL and why we value it can help students be more accepting. This can include the need for collaboration in the world outside the classroom.
2. By starting with easy-to-do CL techniques paired with relatively easy content, students can experience success with CL and "discover" the benefits for themselves. This makes a subsequent discussion of rationale more meaningful.
3. Rather than explaining an entire technique before students begin, the first time the technique is used, we can explain it one step at a time.
4. Drawings and diagrams to illustrate how a technique works. This complements oral and written directions.
5. Demonstrating the technique with one or more students is another way to clarify.
6. Students can do "processing group interaction", i.e., during or after each group activity they discuss how well their group is functioning, including how well they are implementing the technique or how they should adapt it.
7. Students like knowing why and how we are doing things in the classroom.
8. Having a student-centred philosophy means involving students in decisions about how they learn. Hopefully, they will see the value of continuing to use CL techniques and attitudes outside class as well.

QUESTION C: HOW CAN CL HELP STUDENTS PREPARE FOR ACCURACY-BASED STANDARDIZED TESTS SUCH AS THE TOEFL?

1. Published multiple-choice practice tests for TOEFL (or teacher-made ones) can be utilized in CL groups. Below are two ways. If class time is short, these activities can be introduced and students encouraged to meet on their own outside class or in a self-access centre for further practice/discussion.
 - a. Pair students with one worksheet of 10-20 items. Student pairs work through the items, agree (or not) on the answers, recording both answers if they differ, then check with an answer sheet that is provided after they have finished. Pairs ask other pairs for explanations on items they have missed. Any items still not understood (or also missed by the other pair) are checked with a third pair. The teacher is consulted only as a last resort. Extra worksheets can be provided for home practice.
 - b. Prepare simple board games (roll the dice, move a marker) to use with TOEFL test items. Cut the test into strips, each with a single item. Put the strips in envelopes, have answer sheets ready. Each group of 4 gets an envelope, answer sheet, game board (make one on 8 1/2 x 14 paper and duplicate) and a die or spinner. Students provide their own markers (a coin, eraser, paper clip). In turn they roll the die, move their markers, answer a question from the envelope while another group member checks the answer sheet. If the student gets it wrong, s/he moves back to the space s/he held at the beginning of that turn. Groups will often want to discuss each item among themselves before and after checking the answer. As with *a.* above, it's good to have intact copies of practice tests to distribute. Otherwise, some will want to copy each item into their notebooks.
3. The shortest distance to the goal is not always a straight line, e.g., research suggests that the best way to increase one's vocabulary is not to study lists of words but to get large quantities of comprehensible input by such means as extensive reading. In other words, even though students do not take their tests in groups, maybe studying together and doing communicative activities is the best way to prepare for them.
4. By working in CL groups, students improve their language and thinking skills, thus preparing them to take on individual tasks, such as standardized tests. It's like the scaffolding used in constructing a building. The group provides the support to prepare students to eventually stand on their own.
5. If students comprehend a concept well enough to explain it to a peer, they really comprehend. Also, helping others builds self-confidence.
6. Peer-editing can help students learn grammar because it is error analysis taught meaningfully, not just by the teacher.
7. Learning in groups improves listening comprehension, a component of many standardized tests.

QUESTION D: HOW CAN WE AS TEACHERS FIND THE VAST AMOUNT OF PREPARATION TIME NECESSARY TO SET UP STRUCTURED CL ACTIVITIES?

1. Cooperation is not only for students, but for teachers too. Sharing lightens the load, e.g., exchanging materials and team teaching.
2. More and more materials are being published which incorporate CL. This will reduce preparation time a bit.
3. Like with most other things, the more we do CL, the better and faster we get at it. Plus, over the years, we accumulate lots of materials. We can recycle these.

4. With time and guidance, students too get better at doing CL and can work together more independently. Also, we can involve students in some of the preparation.
5. We can use non-CL activities from textbooks by just changing the directions to make them cooperative group activities.
6. We shouldn't try to do it all at once: start with a small lesson/activity and build.

QUESTION E: WHAT CAN WE SAY TO COLLEAGUES WHO WANT TO GET STARTED WITH CL?

1. Start slowly. It's not necessary (or realistic) to change your whole way of teaching overnight.
2. Read books and articles about CL.
3. Attend in-service courses. These should give you a chance to participate in CL yourself, but in the students' role.
4. Cooperate with fellow teachers on an ongoing basis, e.g., observing each other's classes and sharing materials.
5. Realize that it's a change for students too. Don't be afraid to discuss this with them.
6. Cooperation can be a content theme as well as a teaching method, e.g., students write a composition about a time they successfully collaborated with others and send copies to their former collaborators.
7. Offer solitary activities for students who are initially very resistant to change.
8. Teach the importance of group communication skills and why they are important in acquiring and using a language. Team-building and learning to be a productive group member are all part of it.
9. Don't give up after the first try. Trust that students (and you) will get used to CL if you do it regularly.
10. After a great success OR a great failure, reflect on what you did and what students did, what you remembered to do and what you left out, and what you'd keep and what you'd do differently next time.
11. Establish rules (or procedures) for working in groups. This reduces management problems.
12. Try simple CL techniques first.
13. Relax and enjoy the new experience.

QUESTION F: WITH WHAT OTHER CHANGES IN LANGUAGE TEACHING METHODS DOES CL FIT WELL? WHY?

1. With learner autonomy, because CL moves away from the teacher-centred classroom.
2. With thinking skills, because explaining to and discussing with others sharpens our thinking.

3. With task-based language teaching (TBLT), because most of the tasks in TBLT are done with others, just as in real life.
4. With communicative and interactive methods, because the quantity of student talk skyrockets, as does the need for negotiation of meaning (the talk that goes on to insure that what is said is actually understood, e.g., saying, "What does 'autonomy' mean?").
5. With learner strategy training, because many useful learning strategies require collaboration.
6. With catering to various learning styles, because CL broadens the range of teaching/learning modes.
7. With function-based syllabi, because there are so many key language functions that are necessary for effective group interaction.
8. With global education and values education, because coming to know and learning to collaborate with others toward common goals is fundamental to making a better world.
9. With teaching for multiple intelligences, because CL provides opportunities for students to develop their interpersonal intelligence.
10. In heterogenous classes, with learning about other cultures and seeing beyond stereotypes, because students interact meaningfully with others who are different from themselves.
11. With authentic materials, because in real life much language use occurs as we collaborate with others. Also, CL fits well with project work - a great way to authentically link with the world outside the classroom.
12. With student-centred approaches, because in CL, students play a greater and more varied role.

CONCLUSION

This article has considered six questions commonly asked about the use of cooperative learning in language instruction. In this conclusion, we would like to discuss two misconceptions about cooperative learning: (1) that it is easy to use, and (2) that it is simple to understand. Some people believe that group activities are the easy, lazy way to teach: all we teachers have to do is put students in their groups and let them do the rest. While it is true that some teachers do this, in reality, as is clear from the six questions discussed above, using group activities conscientiously can actually increase teachers' work, because a great deal of careful preparation and on-the-spot monitoring are called for.

The second misconception - that cooperative learning is simple to learn - is related to the first. If it is the lazy way to teach, what is there to learn about? Thus, a three-hour workshop should be sufficient. In reality, cooperative learning is a more complex form of instruction, because in a teacher-fronted classroom, as long as we teachers have our lesson prepared, we can be fairly sure the class will flow okay. Because in this teacher-fronted classroom, interaction is only of the teacher-student kind, we can predict what will happen at any point in the lesson.

In contrast, when groups are used, the variable of student-student interaction enters the picture, and planning becomes less certain as we must rely on students to be active and take some responsibility for how the class flows. Students are no longer just passively responding to the teacher; in this more complex teaching/learning environment created by group activities, students are now partially responsible for initiating and continuing classroom discourse.

Therefore, teachers need additional knowledge and skills in order to make cooperative learning an effective part of their teaching repertoire. A three-hour workshop is clearly not enough to accomplish this. Instead, we recommend an ongoing program of instruction in cooperative learning which incorporates peer observation and coaching, so that cooperative learning takes place among teachers as well as among their students.

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